

Farmers and Merchants Union Bank

The 1919 Prairie School-style Farmers and Merchants Union Bank at 159 West Prairie Street in Columbus had its newly restored façade revealed on December 16, 1998. This bank is the last of eight small, Midwestern banks designed by Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. It was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976.

The original building has a compact, rectilinear plan. The walls are tapestry brick, carefully selected to give a shaded effect. The exterior is elaborately decorated with the terra cotta ornamentation for which Sullivan is famous. The granite and glass façade adjacent to the front entrance replaced the original storefront in 1980 when the bank expanded. Each piece of the façade is a unique piece designed by Sullivan. Two steel beams carry the terra cotta and Sullivan's drawings called for these beams to be anchored securely. The right beam was secured, but the left one was not anchored at all and moved very early in the history of the building. Early photographs show tiny cracks in the terra cotta on the left side of the façade.



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Bank directors took it upon themselves to restore the “jewel box” of downtown Columbus and work began in October 1997. John Waite of John G. Waite and Associates of Albany, New York, oversaw the project. Spray-O-Bond Company of Niles, Illinois, specialists in restoring historic masonry buildings, completed removal, restoration, and rebuilding of the terra cotta.

The Columbus Historic Landmarks and Preservation Commission and the Columbus Downtown Development Corporation (Columbus Main Street) co-hosted the formal unveiling which attracted more than 150 people.

For more information, call the Wisconsin Main Street Program at (608) 266-7531.

